

Plus And Minus

Webster Praised, Criticized For Job

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QUESTIONS ABOUT William H. Webster's grasp of foreign policy, and about the CIA's performance in the Persian Gulf standoff, were raised in the months before Webster resigned as director Wednesday.

To be sure, even his critics gave Webster credit for restoring integrity to the Central Intelligence Agency. He was a badly needed Mr. Clean for a CIA soiled by scandals involving his predecessor, the late William J. Casey.

Congressional leaders of both parties also credited Webster with mending fences on Capitol Hill. Where Casey avoided congressional scrutiny, Webster invited it.

But as early as the fall of 1989, and increasingly during the Persian Gulf emergency, Webster was faulted by some — particularly at the White House — for failing to provide adequate information on foreign flash-points. His scanty background on foreign policy was seen as a liability in a fast-changing world.

If he had stayed on, Webster would have faced tough questions by both the House and Senate intelligence committees about the performance of U.S. intelligence agencies, especially during the Persian Gulf crisis. Both panels plan hearings later this year about the structure of Webster's job and about how well U.S. policy-makers were served by Webster's information.

"Logically, some people might make a connection between his departure and the quality of U.S. intelligence information during the Persian Gulf War," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. McCain said he respected Webster, but contended that the overall structure of the U.S. intelligence apparatus "ought to be reviewed."

One congressional source, who asked that his name not be used, spoke for many who dealt with Webster. "The basic rap on him was that he just didn't have the depth of knowledge on foreign policy," the source said. "It's not enough just to be a good lawyer, or a good manager."

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SEN. JOHN MCCAIN, member of Armed Services Committee.

Publicly, President George Bush and other administration officials had high praise Wednesday for Webster. They lauded his dedication and his honesty. Bush said he had "no complaints whatsoever" about the quality of intelligence about the Persian Gulf crisis.

Privately, however, White House officials and some in Congress faulted the CIA for underrating the threat from Iraq in the beginning, and overrating its strength at the end.

In his new book "The Commanders," journalist Bob Woodward writes that Webster — in late December — mistakenly predicted that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would pull out of Kuwait once he realized the strength of the U.S.-led allied forces massed against him.

Pentagon intelligence officials, however, saw that as "a repeat of the classic mistake made prior to the Iraqi invasion," Woodward writes. They sent their dissenting, and more accurate, view to Bush: that Saddam would stand and fight.

One source said that, the "straw that broke the camel's back" for the White House was the CIA's overly cautious assessment of U.S. bombing damage to Iraqi forces. Military intelligence turned out to be more accurate, the source said.

Others noted that Webster had not been at many of the meetings at which key decisions on the Persian Gulf crisis were made.

In January, some Democrats were furious at what they believed was a politically motivated flip-flop by Webster. Throughout the fall, the CIA had been saying the economic sanctions against Iraq were doing severe damage. Many Democrats used that as-

essment to justify voting against a resolution authorizing Bush to go to war.

But just before that vote, Webster declared that sanctions in themselves wouldn't work. The Democrats felt they had been hung out to dry.

Others, however, defended Webster as a professional who generally stayed away from politics and helped tame an agency that had run wild under Casey.

Inside the CIA itself, Webster was regarded as an outsider by some who may have preferred Casey's free-wheeling ways.

"The judge is Mr. Compliance," a retired senior CIA official told the Post-Dispatch. Webster's questions, the official said, would be: "Is it the law? Is it moral? Is it right?"

Another former senior CIA official, insisting on anonymity, said Webster "took a galloping organization to a very slow walk. He was like the guy sitting in a buggy with the horses running down hill, who's pulling on the reins and the horses want to run downhill."

Sen. Alan Specter, R-Pa., who spent six years on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said major improvements were needed in gathering intelligence from spies on the ground, and in the overall structure of the U.S. intelligence apparatus.

But Specter, in an interview, said Webster "has done the best he could in trying to manage an octopus."

Several well-connected sources expressed the view that Webster had accomplished his main job — that of restoring the CIA's battered image — and that it was now time for someone with comparable integrity but a greater knowledge of foreign affairs to take on the job.

Sen. John C. Danforth, R-Mo., a longtime friend, said the resignation "came out of the blue." He said Webster had "contributed a great deal to the government in a variety of posts."

Sen. Christopher S. Bond, R-Mo., said he had discussed it with Webster in advance and was convinced that the decision to leave was Webster's alone. "He wasn't forced out," Bond said.

This story includes information from Bill Lambrecht, Jon Sawyer, and Robert L. Koenig of the Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau.

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Date 9 MAY 91